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ABSTRACT

The extent to which U.S. colleges and universities contribute to the fulfillment of students' lives is discussed by Secretary of Education William Bennett in an address to Harvard University. Secretary Bennett's observations are based on his experiences as a law student, freshman proctor, and tutor at Harvard University, as well as his subsequent experiences at other colleges and universities, including teaching at six institutions. He believes that there is a gap between the rhetoric and reality of American higher education. While noting the vast facilities and resources at Harvard and other institutions, Secretary Bennett emphasizes the importance of a good general education, including the benefits of a real core curriculum (i.e., a set of fundamental courses, ordered, purposive, and coherent). He argues that too often colleges and universities, especially the most prestitious institutions, fail in the discharge of their educational responsibilities. Of interest is a survey of undergraduates that found two-fifths of respondents did not feel any professor took "special personal interest" in their academic progress, and many desired better guidance. Secretary Bennett also discusses the financial condition of higher education and the idea of the university as a place for free exchange of ideas. (SW)

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THE SECRETARY

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WILLIAM J. BENNETT

UNITED STATES SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

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Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

October 10, 1986

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During the Roman Saturnalia even slaves could speak freely. On the occasion of Harvard College's 350th anniversary, let me invoke ancient custom and ask that, I, a public servant, be permitted to speak freely. And so I shall speak about the condition, as I see it, of American higher education today. I am not confident that this condition is an entirely healthy one.

It gives me no pleasure to say this. I spent the majority of my adult years on college and university campuses, and my memories of those years are fine ones. Even now it is a special pleasure to get back onto college campuses, and talk to students and professors, and browse in the bookstores, and remind myself of all the reasons these institutions should be worthy of allegiance and esteem. And so I'm glad to be here, at Harvard, today, to help the College celebrate its 350th birthday.

I'm glad not simply because Harvard is a representative institution of American higher education. I'm personally glad to be back. I spent three very interesting years here, and it's good to return. I say this not out of excessive sentimentality about Harvard. In fact, I received some publicity for a comment I made soon after becoming Secretary of Education, that it is possible to live a fulfilled life without a Harvard degree. Well, it is. But it's also possible to live a fufilled life with one. In any case, a fulfilled life depends on many things; an education is only one of them.

I want to discuss today the question of the extent to which our colleges and universities in general contribute seriously to the fulfillment, to the betterment, of the lives of their students, of the young men and women given over to their charge. I have been concerned with this question since I myself was an undergraduate and then a graduate student; but perhaps not so intensely until I arrived at Harvard in 1968. I came as a law student, and became also a proctor in Matthews, and a tutor in Social Studies. I had a good time, and learned some things and treasure some memories.

Let me mention one set of memories in particular. My job as a freshman proctor was far and away the best part of my years here. I had a good time doing it, I made some fast friends, I learned a great deal, and I think I was able to be of some actual help to those whose well-being was my direct and ongoing responsibility. Every year, from the photographs and records that were available, I memorized my freshmen before they arrived, so that I could greet them by name and be somewhat familiar with their interests and talents. I made it a point not to conform to the pretentious practice of keeping proctor's office hours -- mere graduate or law students acting like full professors; my freshmen were always welcome in my room, and they made use of this welcome. We spent a lot of time together, at parties, at our own softball and football games, and in serious and considerably less than serious

discussion. To some of them, I'm proud to say, I occasionally gave a hard time; I was tough on drugs, and I would not sign course-change cards if I thought a student was going after gut courses or otherwise undercutting his academic opportunities.

Proctoring was the highlight of my experience at Harvard, though I enjoyed the tutoring as well, and law school was at least interesting. But out of these various Harvard experiences, and especially from the intense experience and illuminating vantage point of a proctor, I formed some notions both about this university and about American higher education in general. My subsequent experiences at other colleges and universities have served to strengthen these notions into convictions.

One of my fundamental convictions is this: There is an extraordinary gap between the rhetoric and the reality of American higher education. The gap is so wide, in fact, that we face the real possibility -- not today, perhaps not tomorrow, but someday -- of an erosion of public support for the enterprise.

The rhetoric of contemporary American higher education, the terms in which its practitioners and advocates speak of it, is often exceedingly pious, self-congratulatory, and suffused with the aura of moral superiority. The spokesmen for higher education tend to invoke the mission of the university as if they were

reciting the Nicene Creed: one, holy, universal, and apostolic church. To be sure, being modern and sophisticated, they also know the rhetorical uses of a little well-placed deprecation, and they can speak winningly of the need for constant self-inspection and self-improvement. But try, as I have tried, to criticize American higher education by the one yardstick that matters -- namely, the relative success or failure of our colleges and universities at discharging the educational responsibilities that they bear. From the reaction, you would think I had hurled a rock through the stained-glass window of a cathedral. The response to my criticism was not "Prove it," or "You're wrong for the following reasons"; it was more like "How dare you" -- "Who do you think you are?" Well, I know who I am, having been a student at three colleges and universities, and a teacher at six. I know who I am, but does the university know what it is? The university claims to educate, to improve the minds -- even the hearts -- of young men and women. Sometimes it does this, to be sure -- but not as often, and not as wholeheartedly and as purposefully and as successfully as it should.

Let's take Harvard as an example. Considering the vast sums that parents pay for the privilege of sending their children to a college like Harvard, it may seem gauche and impertinent to ask whether the sacrifice is matched by the value of the education received in exchange. But the question is nevertheless worth

asking, for the fact is that neither those fees themselves, nor a $3.1 billion endowment, nor a library system staggering in its holdings, nor research laboratories and scientific facilities that are the envy of the world, nor well-furnished centers for the study of domestic and international affairs, nor first-class museums and theaters, nor a faculty justly renowned for its scholarship and intellectual brilliance, nor even, for that matter, a brainy and resourceful student body -- the fact is that none of these things is evidence that Harvard or any similarly situated university is really fulfilling its obligation to its own students of seeing to it that when they leave after four years, they leave as educated men and women.

That Harvard is a place where one can get a good education, no one can doubt. The reason has largely to do with the presence here on one campus of all those resources I've just enumerated, and especially the final two items on the list: the bright young men and women whom the college attracts as students, and the gifted scholars with whom they are placed in proximity. From such a combination of active elements, exciting things will occur. It's a good bet. But it does not occur in other cases -- and I would fault Harvard and other universities for this: there's not that much effort to see to it, systematically and devotedly, that real education occurs. Under the justification of deferring to individual decisions and choices, much is left to

chance. Sometimes a proctor, a professor, a dean, steps in and takes a real interest in a student's education -- but that's often the luck of the draw.

Our students deserve better. They deserve a university's real and sustained attention to their intellectual and their moral well-being. And they deserve a good general education -- at a minimum, a systematic familiarization with our own, Western tradition of learning: with the classical and Jewish-Christian heritage, the facts of American and European history, the political organization of Western societies, the great works of Western art and literature, the major achievements of the scientific disciplines -- in short, the basic body of knowledge which universities once took it upon themselves as their obligation to transmit, under the name of a liberal education, from ages past to ages present and future.

As the distinguished historian James H. Billington has remarked, American universities have as a rule given up on this once central task --- with the result that not only do students now tend to lack a knowledge of their own tradition, they often have no standpoint from which to appreciate any other tradition, or even to <u>have</u> a sense of tradition. Billington characterizes the typical undergraduate curriculum of today as a "smorgasbord." If this Scandinavian metaphor betrays too Western a bias, I would

propose instead the metaphor of an old-style Chinese menu, the kind that used to adorn the Hong Kong restaurant on Mass Ave, where a customer could pick at leisure from Column A and Column B. Whatever may be said of this as a meal, it is not a model for a college curriculum.

But, one might respond, here at Harvard, we have the Core Curriculum. Well, I could respond in turn, do you? You have a symbolic nod, a head feint, in the direction of a core curriculum. I have studied the Harvard catalog, and I agree that under the heading of the Core Curriculum we find an agglomeration of courses, many of them obviously meaty and important, taught by eminent scholars, on a wide variety of subjects. But it seems to me that many of them could more appropriately find their place among the individual offerings of the various departments of instruction, from where, indeed, they give every appearance of having been plucked, only to be regrouped in new combinations. In what sense, however, do these courses constitute a <u>core</u> -- i.e., the central, foundational part of a liberal education? Some of the courses are real core courses -- and my sense is that in fact students, to their credit, often flock to such classes. But they do not constitute a true curriculum. I think students would benefit from a real core curriculum -- i.e., a <u>set</u> of fundamental courses, ordered, purposive, coherent. I cannot discern such a core curriculum here.

Now despite this, many Harvard students get an education -- or at least they learn a lot. And of course there is a limit to what any curriculum can accomplish. But if Harvard were more intentional about it, more committed to ensuring that its undergraduates received an education commensurate with the promise held out by the Core Curriculum, it would be doing even better by its students, and it would set a clearer example for all the institutions that look to it. There are too many intellectual and educational casualties among the student body of Harvard. Of course there would be some under any plan; but there are more than there have to be, and that's because luck, serendipity, chance, peer pressure, and a kind of institutional negligence -- often a very high-minded negligence -- are not the best guarantors of a general education. Some people don't get educated here -- too many for the greatest university in the country. If we say to parents and taxpayers and donors when we take their money -- often large amounts of it -- that we'll educate their sons and daughters -- let's do so. Let's do what we promise.

After all, American colleges and universities are quick to proclaim their duty to address all sorts of things that are wrong in the world, to speak truth to power, to discourse on the most complex social and moral issues beyond their walls, and to instruct political and business and religious leaders on the

proper path to follow. But they have a prior duty, which is to see to the education of the young people in their charge. They ought to be expected to take a proctor's interest in that education -- this is, after all, what they are paid for. Some do -- perhaps especially the smaller, less famous, institutions. But too often our institutions -- especially our most prestigious institutions -- fail in the discharge of their educational responsibilities. And they ought to be held to account for this -- not just by parents and trustees and donors and taxpayers, but above all by students.

I was interested to read in The Chronicle of Higher Education of a recent, comprehensive survey of undergraduates that found the following: two-fifths reported that no professor at their institution took a "special personal interest" in their academic progress; and fewer than one-fifth rated their institution's academic advisory programs "highly adequate," while nearly three of five rated them merely "adequate" or worse. Students should not accept this state of affairs as inevitable, or pre-ordained; I think that demanding greater guidance, a more serious assumption of responsibility by their institutions, is a worthy cause for student activism. Commencement exercises at Harvard College used to conclude -- perhaps they still do -- with the president's welcoming the new graduates into the company of educated men and women. If students feel that their years at

Harvard are failing to prepare them adequately for membership in that privileged company, they should let Harvard know.

Let me add that Harvard would, I think, be prepared to listen. One approach that may help foster quality and focus and purpose in undergraduate education goes by the name of assessment -- that is, assessing what students actually learn. I suggested, near the beginning of my tenure as Secretary of Education, that more attention to this issue might be desirable. At the time many in higher education refused even to consider it. But I do want to pay tribute to your President, my former crackerjack labor law teacher, Mr. Bok. He thinks the question of quality and assessing quality is important, as he said in his last annual report, and he's beginning to do something about it, with a faculty seminar, among other things, here at Harvard. Good for him. That's leadership. I hope others will follow -- and we in the Department of Education stand ready to help.

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Students should make other demands of colleges and universities as well. William James said the purpose of a college education is to help you to know a good man when you see him. (We can add "and a good woman.") He said a college education's best claim is that it helps you to value what deserves to be valued: "The only rational ground for pre-eminent admiration of any single

college," James said, speaking of Harvard, "would be its pre-eminent spiritual tone." And James warned that all too often, "to be a college man, even a Harvard man, affords no sure guarantee for anything but a more educated cleverness in the service of popular idols and vulgar ends."

Notice that James is talking about both intellectual and moral discernment. What of moral discernment in particular? Most of our colleges would not dream of claiming to offer a moral education to their students, to their charges. Most do not seek to improve the individual moral sense of their students -- much less their faculty. But there is no shortage of moralizing and moral posturing -- especially the kind that does not cost anything of the individual, that does not take time or self-denial or effort. Chekhov wrote, "You can't become a saint through other people's sins," but many seem to think that's just how you do it. I remember some teachers and tutors in the 70's who were at a fever pitch over international justice and the welfare of others in general, but in particular they did not want to give much time to those on their own campus whom they were charged to help. The advantage of a concern for justice in general, for justice somewhere else, is that it takes less time than pursuing justice in particular, and it has the added benefit of not interfering with meals, socializing and other engagements.

Now where are many of our colleges and universities on the issues of their responsibility to protect their students and their obligation to foster moral discernment in their students? With the exception of a relatively few places -- mostly religious or military institutions, I gather -- higher education is silent. Many colleges freely dispense guidance to those beyond their walls, and such guidance is to be welcomed in a free society; but colleges that aim, as they might put it, to "lead" society's conscience on various social problems should not, when faced by a real problem within their competence to deal with, duck or throw up their hands. When it comes to drugs on campus, too many college presidents say, well, that's a society-wide problem -- there's little we can do about it. This unaccustomed modesty from higher education is puzzling. I think moral responsibility begins at home. To be interested -- intensely interested -- in broader issues is fine, but to neglect one's basic responsibilities is not. It is true that dealing with the drug problem requires a more sustained effort than signing a petition or mounting a demonstration; it requires individual and institutional time and long-term commitment. These have not been very forthcoming on very many of our campuses.

Earlier on, I compared the modern university with the old church. Although I am known, generally and correctly, as a friend of religion, let me say this: the self-righteousness that has given

so many religious institutions and spokesmen a bad name has found an even more secure and hospitable home in the modern university. Even more, because in the old churches most divines did not forget that the first injunction was, heal thyself; they knew they had to attend to their own souls, and then those of their parishioners, before preaching to the outside world. The residents of the modern university all too often take it upon themselves to preach, without even a cursory acknowledgment that they should first attend to healing themselves.

There is another analogy that can be drawn between the contemporary university and the old church. The old church fell into some disrepute because its exhortations to poverty and holiness were too often belied by the worldliness and sumptuousness of its clerics. Similarly, American higher education simply refuses to acknowledge the obvious fact that, in general, it is rich. Whether this refusal is due to calculation or self-deception, I do not know, but in all the debates over student aid and federal tax policy, somehow this basic fact has been neglected. Now reasonable people can differ over student aid or tax policies -- but these differences should be based on facts. And the fact is that the American people have been very generous to higher education in this country.

From higher education's publicity you would think that hosts of institutions are on the brink of collapse, others near the abyss; but this is not so. The number of institutions of higher education in the United States has increased from 1,852 in 1950 to 2,230 in 1965 to 3,231 in 1980 to 3,331 today. The number of public institutions continues to increase; the number of private institutions continues to increase. This is fine -- but let's not pretend this is a shrinking enterprise, in a perilous state.

And let's not pretend the wealth of this increasing number of institutions is shrinking, either. Gross national spending on higher education in this nation has gone, in constant 1985-1986 dollars from $12 billion in 1950 to $53 billion in 1965 to over $100 billion today. The wealth -- the endowments -- of our institutions of higher education have also continued to increase -- especially in the past few years. In fact, the Reagan-era stock market may be the best thing to have happened in a long while to American higher education.

But to say this is to adopt a false criterion of well-being for our institutions of higher education, a criterion their spokesmen too often adopt. It is to mistake a means for an end. Now I work in Washington, and I see higher education much of the time through its representatives there. Of those representatives I would say this: I have never seen a greater interest in <u>money</u> --

money, cash, bucks -- among anybody. The higher education lobbyists put Harvard Square hawkers to shame. They are, admittedly, very good at getting their funds from a Congress seemingly enraptured by the pieties, pontifications, and poor-mouthings of American higher education. But very few words can be heard from any of these representatives about other aspects of higher education -- issues like purpose, quality, curriculum, the moral authority and responsibilities of universities; most of the time, all we hear from them are pleas for money, for more money.

For example, just the other week, the American Council on Education appointed a 33-member national "Commission on National Challenges in Higher Education"; the purpose was to provide "a new, exciting agenda" for American higher education. But this agenda is limited in an interesting way: the commission will <u>not</u> deal with such issues as what should be taught or what students are learning. Rather, the president of the ACE said, "We will be looking at such questions as 'What does higher education mean... to the people who fund us?' and 'What are their responsibilities?'" Notice: <u>their</u> responsibilities. And the purpose of the exercise, it is reported, is that "it is hoped that, by highlighting the importance of education to the nation, the Commission can coax additional funds from Congress." Is it likely that this report will be an examination of the real national challenges in higher education?

Even supporters of increased government spending in higher education are coming to find the spectacle in Washington a bit much. Thus the Washington Post recently took issue with colleges' objections to the new tax bill under the headline, "Crying Towel for Colleges." And there is some danger that higher education's tendency to cry "Wolf" so insistently and so tiresomely will lead even Congress, one of these days, to balk.

Money is a means. It can be used for good and ill. In some cases money has aided good things, but in others money has aided in a kind of corruption. Money has meant growth and expansion, which in some places has meant a diffusion and loss of focus, a loss of central purpose. And more money has given many in our universities the opportunity to avoid doing one thing above all -- actually teaching large numbers of students; or, in some cases, any students. Bennett's axiom: After a certain point, the more money you have, the fewer distinguished professors you will have in the classroom. This is an oddity of academic life. X dollars buys the students one professor, 2x dollars buys them two, but 3x and 4x and 5x dollars gradually remove the professor from the student, and 6x dollars may replace all the classroom professors with graduate students. So money is not an unambiguous good. In any case, it's often not that hard to get money -- but to bring quality and focus and purpose to a place, now that's harder.

My final topic is tolerance: the university as a home for the free exchange of ideas. We are all too familiar with recent incidents of denial of free speech on college campuses. There was even an incident here at Harvard, last spring, though I was glad to see Harvard invited the victimized speakers back. Still, as Wayne State University President David Adamany said earlier this year, "The whole nation knows that faculty members, students, academic administrators, and some governing boards have in recent years silenced unpopular speakers -- especially speakers on the right... The shame for those of us who are active liberals is that we do not join in a chorus of condemnation of our colleagues when right-leaning speakers are kept off of our campuses by threat or are silenced by disorder." Perhaps such a chorus of condemnation may now -- finally -- begin to emerge, as in the recent speech by Yale President Benno Schmidt; such a chorus had better emerge, and triumph -- or else the game really will be up.

And we should also be careful not to allow a more subtle and pervasive kind of conformism and intolerance to permeate our institutions of higher education. Let me put it simply. Prestigious, selective, leading universities -- whatever modifier you wish -- have a tendency in our time to show a liberal bias. This is partly because most of the people in the humanities and social sciences departments in these universities stand to the

left of center. A 1984 Carnegie Foundation survey of the professoriate found that, among philosophy faculty at four-year institutions, 21.7 percent designated themselves as "left," none as "strongly conservative;" for the sociologists, the percentages were 37 percent vs. .9 percent; for historians, 12.9 percent vs. 3.0 percent. As the values-forming teachers of the young, these professors may tend to tilt students in the direction of their own beliefs. (Also many students coming to such universities think that a general liberal bias is expected of them). So certain views are in a minority, and indeed are unpopular.

This need not be a great problem, as long as we are very careful that a generally shared political viewpoint does not lead to the explicit or implicit censorship of unpopular ideas. Unpopular views -- views unpopular in the academy, that is -- should not merely be grudgingly tolerated there; they should be respected, and fostered. Harvard professor James Q. Wilson wrote over a decade ago that of the five institutions of which he had been a part -- the Catholic Church, the University of Redlands, the U.S. Navy, the University of Chicago, and Harvard -- it was Harvard that was perhaps the least open to free and uninhibited discussion. Combatting this sort of intolerance, if it is present, requires more than allowing an occasional dissenting outside speaker to appear on campus. It requires self-criticism and self-examination; it requires a conscious striving by the

academy against the tendency to become home to a "herd of independent minds." For if you cannot hold or express or argue for an unorthodox view at a university without risk of penalty, either explicit penalty or social disdain, the university will collapse like a deck of cards, falling of its own weight. If we cannot protect the basic principle of academic freedom, then we cannot even begin to hope that our colleges and universities will evolve into a recognizable imitation of what they claim to be.

Let me conclude: Universities deserve the kind of scrutiny they like to give to others. Universities cost a lot, and they puff and boast a lot. From time to time, it's not a bad idea to look at what's really going on, and to ask some hard questions. I've tried to do a bit of that today, and I've tried to do it for the sake of our students. I hope that some in American higher education will take seriously the questions I've raised, and ask <u>themselves</u> how our colleges and universities today can do better by their students -- who are after all the purpose of the enterprise. If we are not doing as well as we might by them, we should begin to see to it that we do better.